

Lawmakers criticize selection of training site

By Tom Gibb
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Two lawmakers wrote to Gov. Ridge yesterday to complain that the Pennsylvania National Guard was hoodwinking him about its choice of land for a heavy equipment training site in the northeastern corner of Clearfield County.

The whole episode could have "serious repercussions on your governorship and your future political aspirations," state Reps. Camille "Bud" George and Dan A. Surra warned Ridge in their letter.

For now, though, the letter hasn't swayed the governor. Ridge spokesman Steve Aaron said yesterday afternoon that the governor's staff was confident of the Guard's site selection work.

"They're the experts," Aaron said.

The warning to Ridge was prompted by a growing tempest over the Guard's decision, made with little public notice, to buy about 5,400 acres of northeast Clearfield County to serve as a training center at which Guard members could learn to drive tanks and other heavy equipment.

The bulk of the purchase — \$4.3 million for 4,700 acres, most of it reclaimed strip mines — is expected to be completed in the next few weeks.

Even as it prepares to seal those deals, the Guard has offered little in the way of public discussion, raising fears that the center's activities might disrupt life on the lightly populated mountaintops.

Yesterday, George, D-Houtzdale,

Clearfield County, and Surra, D-St. Marys, Elk County, suggested to Ridge that the Guard chose the site as a favor to the major landowner involved, coal company owner C. Alan Walker, a generous Republican contributor. Aaron and Walker deny that.

George and Surra also complained that a June 1998 Guard report comparing the chosen site to another tract 20 miles away was skewed by "misinformation and wild exaggerations."

George and Surra say the land the Guard picked is dotted by more than 100 homes that won't be part of the sale, and that five streams wind through the land, counter to a Guard assessment that the site has no stream crossings.

"It is apparent that whoever wrote the comparison for the Pennsylvania National Guard had never visited the site," Surra said in a statement released yesterday.

But Guard spokesman Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver said yesterday that Guard planners would make sure the training areas avoided the houses and streams and denied any bias in the report.

"This was an independent study ... done by our operations folks," he said.

The Guard has drawn fire from Clearfield County residents for refusing to schedule any public meetings on the plan until April. Yesterday, Cleaver said the Guard still planned no major public meeting until then — but could hold smaller sessions in the interim.

"Probably it is important to pick the schedule up," he said.